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Ammonium perchlorate study minimizes dangers to humans

People who took part in an experiment and inhaled rocket fuel ingredient dust showed no signs of ill-effect.

By Keith Rogers
Review-Journal

Studies on the effects of a rocket fuel ingredient on people and animals show the chemical, ammonium perchlorate, alters the thyroid gland of animals when consumed in drinking water at high doses, but humans who inhaled it experienced no immediate effects.

The findings are based on the first batch of eight studies that were launched after widespread perchlorate contamination was discovered in 1997 in Lake Mead, which is the Las Vegas Valley's primary source of drinking water, and other Western drinking water supplies.

They will be a major factor in the development of regulatory standards, Kevin Mayer, Environmental Protection Agency coordinator for perchlorate issues in the San Francisco region, said Wednesday about the 250-page document. The region includes Nevada.

Mayer said the draft report, whose results were scheduled to appear in today's Federal Register, recommends that a so-called "reference dose" of 32 parts per billion for perchlorate in water be used for development of the standard. That would be less stringent than the temporary guideline of 18 parts per billion that California has used to trigger the shutdown and cleanup of drinking water supplies that contain perchlorate.

The reference dose -- a human health risk assessment -- is based on a 154-pound person drinking slightly more than two quarts of perchlorate-tainted water per day.

Mayer said the Federal Register notice announces a public workshop to be held Feb. 10-11 in San Bernardino, Calif., with a panel of 10 toxicologists and experts from universities and the private sector who will review the findings.

Allen Biaggi, administrator of Nevada's Environmental Protection Division, predicted it will take the EPA "a number of years" to finalize a safe drinking water standard for perchlorate.

"But what this does is it heads us down the road. This has been a real fast-track process and we will continue to work with the EPA, the Department of Defense and the stakeholders," he said.

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